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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000063

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SUBJECT: PALESTINIAN CONFERENCE PRODUCES HARD RHETORIC AND
MISHAL GOES TO EGYPT

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Classified By: Classified by CDA Todd Holmstrom for reasons 1.5 b and d

¶1. (C) Summary: SARG efforts to spin the three-day Palestinian conference as an event for "domestic consumption" and a call for Palestinian solidarity conveniently overlook the harsh anti-U.S., Israeli, and Palestinian Authority rhetoric during the conference and in a seven-page communique (translated version e-mailed separately to NEA/ELA). Hamas leader Khaled Mishal -- who defiantly asserted the right of return for Palestinian refugees, the necessity of an undivided Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state, the right of resistance, and the existence of Palestine "from the river to the sea" -- eagerly announced his acceptance of an Egyptian invitation to meet with Fatah and Egyptian officials in Cairo to discuss the crisis in Gaza and "unity talks" with the Palestinian Authority. End Summary

¶2. (C) As some of our contacts predicted (reftel), the conference organized in the name of re-establishing Palestinian unity actually served to launch a harsh rhetorical assault on Oslo and other initiatives like the Annapolis Conference that had allegedly divided the Palestinian community. Though the final communique astutely avoided criticism of PA President Mahmoud Abbas or other Arab governments, speakers criticized the Palestinian Authority, PA-Israeli negotiations, and asserted the right of armed resistance. The seven-page conference communique emphasizes the return of all occupied lands (from the "river to the sea") before the establishment of a state and demands resistance before formation of a Palestinian government. It also calls for the absolute rejection of the policy adopted by the Oslo team against the resistance, "especially Salam Fayadh and the security forces."

¶3. (C) The Dutch Ambassador, providing a readout to us on Dutch FM Verhagen's January 23 trip to Damascus, reported that President al-Asad had downplayed the conference to Verhagen as an event for "domestic consumption." Asad also reportedly said Syria supported Abbas and "would work on Hamas." Verhagen reportedly confronted FM Muallim on the conference, accusing the SARG of "lying" about the attendance of high-level Syrian officials. The Dutch told us the attendance of Minister of Expatriates Bouthayna Shabban and Minister of Information Mousam Bilal, who were seated in the front row of opening ceremonies, had contradicted Syrian assurances and embarrassed the Dutch FM greatly. Muallim, according to the Dutch ambassador, retorted that Syria had successfully postponed the conference to a "less sensitive" time and had successfully diverted efforts to organize a conference in Tehran, which would have been more provocative. Regarding the attendance of SARG ministers, Muallim and

others "unconvincingly" tried to explain away their presence.

Before departing, Verhagen publicly criticized the confrontational tone of the conference and Syria for allowing it to be held on its territory.

¶4. (C) According to contacts who attended, the participants, especially Hamas leader Khaled Mishal, played on outrage over the Gaza crisis to transform "the Palestinian National Conference" into a reassertion of Hamas' role in the Arab-Israeli conflict and Syria's role as a center of the Arab resistance. According to al-Hayat journalist Ibrahim Hamidi, Mishal successfully re-directed the political aims of the Palestinian diaspora away from the Arab League peace initiative, which calls for a Palestinian state demarcated by 1967 borders. "The language represents a significant political shift," in Palestinian objectives, asserted Hamidi. He added that the conference occurred under the approving eyes of high-level Syrian ministers who attended and by the Syrian public who watched it on Syrian TV.

¶5. (C) Other contacts argued that, despite the harsh rhetoric, the significance of the conference paled in comparison to the immediacy of events in Gaza. PA President Abbas' condemnation of the conference probably called more attention to the event that it would have received had he ignored it, commented International Crisis Group analyst Peter Harling. While the Palestinian Authority sought to play up the death of PFLP leader George Habbas in Jordan and the 60-something crowd in Damascus chanted slogans from the 1970s, the real action was occurring in Gaza, agreed Reuters journalist Khaled Oweiss.

¶6. Still, continued Oweiss, the conference vaulted Hamas and Mishal back into the center of Palestinian politics. The

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message from the conference to PA President Abbas was clear, in that "Hamas is not going away," because Syria and other Arabs now backed efforts to broker a PA-Hamas reconciliation.

The conference, Oweiss suggested, also allowed Mishal and Syria to bury their differences over Syria's presence in Annapolis. For Hamas, the conference represented an affirmation of its decision to revoke its mandate for Abbas to negotiate with Israel and to assert that any deal by Abbas without Hamas' consent would be tantamount to a Palestinian surrender. For Syria, the conference symbolized the return of Syria as the center of the resistance and signaled to the West and Arab countries that no deal could be achieved on the Palestinian track without Syria's assent, asserted Oweiss.

¶7. (C) Egypt's January 25 invitation to Hamas to meet with Fatah and Egyptian officials on the Gaza border crisis was evidence that Mishal's efforts succeeded, at least in part, according to foreign policy analyst and MFA advisor Samir al-Taqi. Already en route to Riyadh, Mishal was now playing a central role in re-engaging the Arab world working to unite the feuding Palestinian factions.

¶8. (C) At the same time, Mishal's trip to Cairo might eventually create a fissure between Hamas and the SARG, suggested al-Taqi. Syria's permission for and association with the conference reflected its interest in re-asserting its own role in the Palestinian issue, he said. Negotiations between Mishal and Abbas that included the possibility of a renewed mandate for Abbas to negotiate with Israel would trigger Syrian concerns that the Syria-Israeli track could be left out. If Syria received the right signals from the West that indicated a readiness to leave the door open on the Golan track, then it might be willing to play a constructive role on the Palestinian track, said al-Taki. "It might be possible for Mishal to fly to Cairo, and after that, board a plane for Doha rather than return to Damascus." Al Taqi's comments on Lebanon (reported septel) suggested a deal to select a Lebanese president within the context of a "freeze" in the Lebanese balance of power would reassure the SARG and provide a motive for acting constructively on the Palestinian

track.

19. (C) Comment: Though it was arguably the crisis in Gaza rather than the Palestinian conference that vaulted Hamas' Khaled Mishal back into the thick of Palestinian politics, the timing of the event from the organizers' perspective could not have been better. From their vantage -- and Syria's, by extension -- Gaza has provided an opportunity to transform for Arab audiences the conference's rejection of PA-Israeli negotiations into a more palatable endorsement of Palestinian unity. Given the SARG's propensity to play to the Arab street, we would be surprised to see Syrian efforts to sideline Mishal in the near term, especially as Syrians now perceive that other Arab countries are actively courting him.

HOLMSTROM